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Consideration of reports submitted by States Parties under article 18 of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women

Fourth periodic reports of States parties

Nicaragua*

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I. Introduction

Nicaraguan legislation is based on agreements and treaties which emanate from international declarations and which form part of the law, although there are other agreements and treaties in the area of ordinary law.

In Nicaragua, references to human rights also encompass women's rights. Since human rights are the birthright of all human beings, Governments should ensure their promotion and protection in all areas of society.

The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women led to the recognition of social rights. It is therefore considered the Magna Carta of women's rights. The Convention is the most comprehensive agreement concluded to date, since it encompasses all international treaties and agreements on the rights of women.

The Convention is also important because it contributes to the conceptualization of the main aspects of women's human rights, namely:

- Civil rights;
- Economic rights;
- Social rights.

The Convention recognized that the social area was the least developed, and accordingly provides that women must have access to better education, health ...d employment.

With respect to the three kinds of rights referred to above, the Convention recognizes that women must have access, on an equal footing, to:

- Opportunities to hold public office;
- Property ownership;
- Health;
- Education;
- Employment.

This means that there should be no discrimination against women in the above-mentioned fields. Moreover, under the Convention, women have the right to decide freely regarding motherhood.

The Convention provides that States parties have the obligation to ensure that women enjoy their rights. It also adopted recommendations and comments on various situations where violence is committed against women and on action to be taken by States to prevent such violence.

The Convention was ratified by Nicaragua in 1981, two years after its adoption by the United Nations General Assembly. Since ratification, women have made major advances within the context of the country's development.

While Nicaragua's legislation has progressed with regard to women's rights, there are still some provisions that discriminate against women.

Following the recognition of women's rights as an integral part of human rights at the international level, and bearing in mind that women account for over 50 per cent of the country's total population, the Government has undertaken to ensure the security of the population, guarantee job security, eliminate poverty and ensure the participation of women in the country's development.

Furthermore, as the government body responsible for all women's activities and for ensuring that women enjoy all the rights provided for under the Convention, the Nicaraguan Institute for Women has drawn up a national plan that involves women in all sectors.

II. General features

Nicaragua, situated in Central America, is the largest of the six countries of the Central American isthmus. It is in the centre, and to the north borders on Honduras and El Salvador (through the Gulf of Fonseca); to the south, Costa Rica; to the east, the Atlantic Ocean; and to the west, the Pacific Ocean.

Nicaragua has a total surface area of 121,428 square kilometres which, according to the Nicaraguan Institute for Statistics and Censuses, does not include land under water. It has a population density of 27.4 inhabitants per square kilometre. Nicaragua's natural beauty is derived from its large lakes, lagoons and many volcanoes. What makes the capital, Managua, appealing is that it nestles among beautiful lagoons, including Tiscapa, Nejapa and Asososca.

According to official data derived from the most recent national census, conducted in 1995, Nicaragua has a population of 4,357,099, of whom 50.72 per cent are female; 62.4 per cent of the population live in the departments along the country's Pacific coast.

According to figures of the Fundación Internacional para el Desafío Económico Global (FIDEG), 56.4 per cent of the population live in urban areas; the rest of the population is rural. Of the total male population, 54.5 per cent live in urban areas, whereas in the case of the female population, 58.2 per cent are urban.

In terms of generations, 45.04 per cent are under 15; in other words, a considerable proportion of the country's population is made up of children and adolescents. Females account for 50.4 per cent of this total.[1] The 15-40 age group accounts for 39.7 per cent of the total population, of whom 53.4 per cent are female. The 40-75 age group accounts for 16.4 per cent of the total population, of whom women make up 52.6 per cent.

Five years ago, the country's main economic activity was based on agricultural and livestock production. The economy is now characterized by its great forestry resources.

Although Nicaragua has always had abundant natural resources and considerable potential for developing them, the country's prospects and ambitions have for many years now been hampered by violence and natural disasters.

[1] The statistical data were drawn from studies carried out by FIDEG and from statistics and censuses of Nicaragua, 1996.

As for Nicaragua's macroeconomic situation, as indicated by the Ministry for Social Action (MAS) in volume II of *Caracterización de la Pobreza*, there has been a slowdown in growth of the main economic indicators in recent years.

According to data provided by MAS, in 1995 Nicaragua had a working-age population of 40 per cent, 41 per cent of whom were economically active, making Nicaragua the country with the lowest such percentage in Central America.

In terms of gender, the proportion of economically active females in the working age population is 18.3 per cent, which is extremely low when compared to the proportion of females in the working-age population (52.3 per cent).[2] The proportion of the economically active male population (64.4 per cent) is much larger than that of the economically active female population; there is a similar situation in rural areas, where women account for 22.2 per cent of the labour force.

Employees, who account for 51.3 per cent of the total labour force, constitute the largest sector; the self-employed sector, with 34.3 per cent of the total, is the second largest sector.[3] There is a higher rate of unemployment in urban than in rural areas, owing to the economic crisis facing the country.

As for the economically active population, of the country's 4.3 million inhabitants, over 40 per cent are of working age, of whom women account for 18.3 per cent.

Overview of the health sector[4]

While the demand for health services has increased in Nicaragua during the past four years, the overall mortality rate has fallen during the past five years. That rate has improved greatly, falling from 9.7 (1980-1985) to 6.6 (1990-1995). These statistics are reflected in the health indicators contained in the following table:

Principal health indicators
Nicaragua (1980-1995)

Indicators	*1980-1985*	*1985-1990*	*1990-1995*
Overall mortality rate (per thousand)	9.7	7.9	6.6
Life expectancy	59.8	63.3	66.2
Infant mortality rate (per thousand live births)	76.4	61.7	53.0

Source: Nicaraguan Institute of Statistics and Censuses (INEC)/Latin American and Caribbean Demographic Centre (CELADE).

* Pan-American Health Organization (PAHO)/World Health Organization (WHO).

[2] *Características del Mercado de Trabajo*, FIODEG, p. 3.
[3] *Caracterización de la Pobreza*, vol. II, MAS, pp. 183-187.
[4] National Health Policy, Ministry of Health, 1997.

The infant mortality rate of 53 per thousand live births is high for Central America; Costa Rica has the lowest rate (12 per thousand live births). As shown in the previous table, the decline in the infant mortality rate remains slow and, according to an official statement by the Ministry of Health, it is unlikely that a rate of 30 per thousand will be achieved by the end of the twentieth century.[5]

Life expectancy

Indicators	*1980*	*1985*	*1993*
Life expectancy at birth	59.8	63.2	66.2
Women	61.9	64.6	67.7
Men	58.6	61.9	64.8

Source: Ministry of Health, Vital Statistics Office (April 1994).

This table shows that life expectancy at birth is greater for women than for men; however, an analysis by period shows that it has been rising for both sexes.

Maternal mortality

Official estimates of the high maternal mortality rate (159 per thousand live births) are disturbing. The primary causes of death are post-partum haemorrhaging, toxaemia of pregnancy, abortion and infections. Women under the age of 18 and over 35 are most likely to be affected.

Fertility

Nicaragua has one of the highest fertility rates in Latin America: 5.9 in 1980, 5.5 in 1990 and 4.8 in 1993.

Overview of the education sector

The current economic crisis in the country has made it impossible for the Government to meet the goals that it had set. However, there have been great efforts to give the population access to education. The Ministry of Education has given priority to education in grades one to four in order to improve the internal efficiency of the system.

The 1980 literacy campaign succeeded in reducing the illiteracy rate from 50.3 per cent (during the 1950s) to about 12.9 per cent; by 1985, however, the rate had risen to about 24.8 per cent, because no provision was made for continuing education to prevent the literate from becoming functionally illiterate. By 1993, the illiteracy rate had reached 29.3 per cent; for this reason, the Ministry of Education has focused teacher training on the fields of adult literacy and adult education.

In response to the rise in the illiteracy rate, the Ministry of Education has taken the following actions:

[5] One of the goals established in Health for All by the Year 2000 and at the World Summit for Children.

- The curriculum has been revised and improved and new textbooks have been published;
- In 1992, 5,500 teachers and 90 municipal technicians, all of them volunteers, were trained. In 1993, this number rose; 7,400 volunteer teachers and 114 municipal technicians received training in adult literacy and adult basic education;
- In 1993, material and financial incentives were provided to 6,143 volunteer teachers.

Technical education

In 1991, the National Technological Apprenticeship Institute (INATEC) established a programme for the advancement of women, the purpose of which is to provide women with technical training so that they are better able to enter the job market.

University education

In 1991, there were 30,733 university students, of whom 51 per cent were women. At the Autonomous University of Nicaragua, the specialization with the largest percentage of women students (61 per cent) was medicine. In 1992, there was a major increase in the number of women university students: in descending order, they accounted for 63.6 per cent of all students in agronomy and 57.6 per cent in architecture.

III. Incorporation of women's rights in Nicaraguan legislation

In Nicaragua, the Constitution clearly affirms absolute respect for human rights; article 46 thereof guarantees State protection, recognition of the fundamental rights of the human person, respect for and promotion and protection of human rights throughout the country, and fulfilment of the commitments made in various global and international conventions and agreements.

Each of these conventions and agreements guarantees recognition of fundamental human rights and equality of rights for men and women.

In Nicaragua, some laws have been amended and others enacted in order to promote the advancement of women in the political, civil, social and economic fields, as follows:

- The Food Act (1992) establishes that parents have the responsibility and the right to provide their children with food and that fathers retain this responsibility even if they leave the nuclear family;
- Amendments to the Penal Code make rape an offence against public order;
- Amendments to the Constitution establish the concept of family assets;
- The Labour Code establishes equal rights for men and women;
- The Agrarian Reform Act gives women the right of access to land;
- The Social Security Act expands the scope of services and benefits to various sectors. It is discriminatory in the case of widows;

– The Breastfeeding Act promotes breastfeeding.

Progress and achievements in these areas are the result of initiatives taken and efforts made in the National Assembly by the Standing Commission on Women, Children, Youth and the Family in cooperation with women's non-governmental organizations, which convey the needs of the groups that they represent.

Despite progress in legislation on behalf of women, there are still gaps in Nicaragua's Civil, Labour and Penal Codes with regard to the traditional attitudes which hinder women's enjoyment of full, effective equality under the law. There are also contradictions, discrimination and serious flaws which affect women's access to justice, including:

– Domestic violence;

– Lack of a Family Code;

– Complicated procedures;

– Women's ignorance of the law;

– Lack of paternal responsibility;

– Delays in payment of child support.

IV. Political rights

The Constitution establishes that men and women have equal rights and responsibilities. Chapter II deals with political rights:

> "All Nicaraguans shall be unconditionally equal; there shall be absolute equality between men and women in the enjoyment and exercise of their political rights and in the fulfilment of their duties and responsibilities" (art. 48).

In recent years, the population has been able to exercise this right by voting, thereby participating in the establishment of a democratic government and the realization of human rights in Nicaragua. Women have played a very significant role in politics, as seen by the considerable number of women candidates from the various parties; this shows that there is equal opportunity for men and women.

Women exercise their right to vote, account for the majority of voters and have run for the offices of president, vice-president, deputy to the National Assembly, mayor, deputy mayor and town councillor.

The percentage of women in the National Assembly is quite high: 90 per cent of political parties include both men and women among their office-holders and alternates. Women occupy over 24 per cent (404) of all such posts and 17 per cent of elected posts.

Women's participation in affairs of State

Legislative authority: Persistent ideologies and patriarchal values which limit women's participation have been weakened with the gradual increase in the number

of women in the legislature; women account for 18.5 per cent of office-holders and alternates.

In 1990, 10 of the 93 deputies in the National Assembly were women. Currently, women account for 20 per cent of the 92 deputies; they hold 7 fewer posts than in 1990. In 1993, Nicaragua had the highest percentage of women deputies in Latin America.

In 1991, the women deputies established the Standing Commission on Women, Children, Youth and the Family, which represents major progress in responding to the demands and needs of these groups.

The women deputies are committed to developing legislation based on the real needs of the various sectors to which women belong.

Executive authority: The number of women in this area remains small. However, there have been women presidents, vice-presidents, ministers, deputy ministers, territorial representatives of the presidency, police chiefs and diplomats assigned to embassies and consulates abroad. Women hold 41 per cent of mid-level posts in the central Government.

During the period 1993-1995, there was a 50-per-cent increase in the number of women (from 10 to 20) holding decision-making posts in the Ministry of Education; the two highest-level posts in this Ministry were held by women. The percentage of women in certain offices was higher (59 per cent).[6]

According to 1994 figures, women occupied 31 per cent of all posts and 20 per cent of high-level posts in the Ministry of Construction and Transportation. The highest percentage of decision-making posts (60 per cent) was in the Department of Economics and Planning.

In 1994, women held 39.1 per cent of all posts and 16.3 per cent of high-level posts in the Institute for Agrarian Reform (INRA).

Women hold the posts of Executive Director and Assistant Director with the rank of Minister and Deputy Minister, respectively, in the Ministry of Culture. The high-level posts in this Ministry are held by women.

Women hold the posts of Executive Director and Assistant Director with the rank of Minister and Deputy Minister, respectively, in the Nicaraguan Institute for Women (INIM); four of the Institute's department heads and the rest of its professional staff are women.

Foreign affairs: In 1990, 34 per cent of Nicaraguan diplomats serving abroad were women; by 1994, that proportion had increased to 39 per cent. In the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 50 per cent of department heads were women; in addition, two higher-ranking officials (the Minister for Foreign Affairs and the Director-General of Protocol) were women.

Armed forces: The percentage of women in the army fell from 0.08 per cent in 1985 to 0.05 per cent in 1990, then rose to 6.13 per cent by 1994. The highest percentage of women hold the rank of lieutenant or officer, but almost equal percentages hold the ranks of second lieutenant and first lieutenant. The number of women army officers and specialists is increasing.

[6] Ministry of Education, Managua, Nicaragua, 1994.

Because the armed forces' activities and functions are of a nature traditionally considered a male preserve, a certain percentage of women working there hold administrative posts.

Judicial authority: The percentage of women in this area has increased considerably. Women account for 14 per cent of Supreme Court judges; in the General Procurator's Office, there were 3 women criminal prosecutors in 1981, 15 by 1986 and 31 by 1993.

In the appeals courts, there was 1 woman judge in 1979, 8 by 1985 and 24 by 1994. In the past decade, Nicaragua has had its first woman Supreme Court justice and its first woman police chief.

Electoral authority: Women account for 20 per cent of electoral officials. One of the five members of the Supreme Electoral Council is a woman, who is currently also the President of the Council.

Municipal governments: This is one of the areas in which women's participation is quite high. In the 1990 elections, 107 women were elected to the post of town councillor and 150 to that of alternate, corresponding to over 13 per cent and over 18 per cent of all such posts, respectively.

In 1994, 10 per cent of Nicaragua's 145 mayors were women; currently, there are 9 woman mayors and 24 woman deputy mayors.

The decrease in the percentage of women in the National Assembly has been compensated for by the fact that women hold more posts at the municipal level than before. While it is true that the number of women mayors fell in the most recent elections, the number of deputy mayors rose. Women account for 9 of Nicaragua's 145 mayors, 23 of its deputy mayors and 178 of its 777 town councillors.

V. Government agencies implementing programmes for women

The Nicaraguan Institute for Women (INIM)

This Institute is a government agency which acts as a standard-setting body as regards equality of access and opportunity for women as economic agents in the development of the nation.

The Institute is headed by a woman and is represented in meetings of the Social Cabinet, thus helping to ensure that the practical and strategic concerns and needs of Nicaraguan women are taken into account in the adoption of national decisions. The professional and technical staff of the Institute are women.

INIM was reactivated in 1991 and strengthened by the legislation concerning its organization, embodied in Decree 36-93 signed on 6 July and published in *La Gaceta* No. 128 on 7 July 1993.

The Institute performs the following functions:

- Contributes to the definition and formulation of government policies and plans promoting the integral development of women;

- Disseminates information about the condition and status of women through an information and communication strategy focused on women and based on coordination between governmental and non-governmental institutions involved in the economic, social, cultural and political development of Nicaragua;
- Strengthens the presence and participation of the Government of Nicaragua in intergovernmental agencies and institutions concerned with various aspects of the status of women;
- Mobilizes financial and technical resources for the activities, projects and programmes for women to be implemented by the Institute.

In recent years, INIM has been strengthened and has made progress towards the attainment of its original objectives. The value of its work has been recognized at both the national and international levels.

Nicaraguan Institute for Agricultural Technology (INTA)

One important achievement of this Institute has been the establishment of the Gender Unit, whose mission is to orientate, coordinate and systematize the process of introducing a gender-oriented approach in the development and transfer of agricultural technologies.

The Gender Unit also works hand in hand with the National Gender Team, whose task is to support the systematization of experiments in this area carried out in various parts of the country.

The Gender Unit has drawn up a complete plan aimed at benefiting rural women which supports specific policies and programmes, and is based on two strategies:

- Strengthening the capacity of the institution to analyse and introduce a gender-oriented approach;
- Supporting action aimed at improving the status and condition of its clientele, regardless of gender.

The objectives of these strategies are to:

- Promote the appointment of more women to technical, professional and managerial posts;
- Train the staff and conduct gender-oriented analysis within the institution;
- Establish a data bank and a system of statistical information broken down by gender;
- Conduct research on the adaptation and validation of alternative technologies in order to improve the output of women's work.

National Technological Apprenticeship Institute (INATEC)

This institution has formulated a policy which takes the needs of young women into account and which:

- As an institutional policy promotes technical training for young people, and especially young women, in order to give them greater access to the labour market;
- Takes into account, in the formulation of policies, the requests of the beneficiaries, as determined through regional surveys carried out by INATEC; the main request is for technical training for women that will enable them to find employment.

The objectives of the programme are to:

- Provide technical training for women so that they can obtain access to the labour market;
- Contribute through a specific gender-oriented methodology to the training of women and their integration in the development process;
- Provide managerial training for women;
- Provide credit to women as part of the policy of generating employment through the establishment of their micro-enterprises.

VI. State achievements in the area of training and awareness

Various State agencies have carried out and promoted activities that benefit women, even though they do not yet have specific policies for women.

The Ministry of Health has introduced a law concerning equal access for men and women which gives priority to the integral health of women.

The Nicaraguan Institute for Agricultural Technology (INTA) has made it part of its institutional policy to grant, and promote the granting of, individual, family and community land deeds to both men and women.

The Nicaraguan Institute for Agricultural Technology (INTA) has developed a gender policy which is currently being implemented.

The National Micro-Enterprise Programme (PAMIC) has initiated a process that supports the gender policy.

The Ministry of Education:

- Guarantees that both girls and boys will have access to primary education;
- Guarantees that young people, both male and female, will have access to secondary education;
- Promotes gender-oriented training workshops for teachers in the first through fourth grades of primary school.

The National Technological Apprenticeship Institute (INATEC) has promoted:

- An equal opportunity policy;
- The training of women in non-traditional fields;
- Gender identity training for men and women.

The Nicaraguan Institute for Women (INIM) has carried out various activities aimed at integrating women in the development process and achieving a society characterized by equality, in which the rights of women are taken into account:

- Meetings with the 48 non-governmental organizations that work with, for and through women in Nicaragua;
- Preparation of a proposed draft gender-oriented law on agricultural development;
- Formulation and implementation of a National Plan for Women;
- Strengthening of working relations with non-governmental organizations carrying out work related to women;
- Participation in the Fourth World Conference on Women;
- Initiation of the work of the women's centres in various departments of the country;
- Ensuring that a gender-oriented approach is maintained in plans, programmes and projects through participation in various commissions:
  - Inter-Institutional Social Technical Commission;
  - National Nutrition Commission;
  - National Population Commission;
  - National Commission for the International Year of the Family;
  - National Family Code Commission;
  - Preparatory Committee for Habitat II.

VII. Economic rights

In considering the economic and social rights of women, it is necessary to consider also the effects which structural-adjustment policies and globalization are having in poor countries. These effects are complicated by the fact that development models have not taken the status and situation of women into account, so that inequalities between men and women are overlooked.

If development models fail to take gender relationships into account, the economic and social rights of women are limited in every respect.

Poor women face innumerable problems, and sometimes the heavy burden of work within the home prevents them from thinking about or benefiting from the economic and social opportunities offered them by the State.

The Government of Nicaragua has been according priority to social-compensation programmes and projects which it is implementing at the national level: food-for-work programmes, provision of financing for production, and promotion of policies aimed at giving women access to land and to the means of production.

Employment

The number of women in the workforce has been increasing in recent years and amounted to 43.3 per cent of the total in 1994. In Nicaragua, as in other Latin American countries, the economically active women live in rural areas. This means that although at one time women were considered as a "reserve" for the "productive work" done by men, there has now been quite a significant increase in the number of women engaged in such work.

The access of women to the labour market has been limited by the relaxation of the laws relating to terms of employment; the latter have deteriorated and competition has intensified in areas where women previously predominated.

Women tend to be employed mainly in the service sector and in the industrial sector, for example in assembly plants. This type of work is not new in Nicaragua, for there was previously a free zone dedicated to the manufacture of clothing, where women constituted a large percentage of the workforce. This type of work forms part of a strategy adopted by the Government in the context of globalization with a view to boosting the economy.

Paid work for women is becoming increasingly hard to find. The number of women employed in both the formal and informal sectors of the economy has declined as they are displaced by men.

Women's access to employment is further impeded by their reproductive responsibility; they tend to undertake work which can be done at home (operating small stores, preparing and selling nacatamales, tortillas, etc.), but which generates little income.

The introduction of a free market and the removal of price controls has made the lives of women more difficult. One of the most serious problems they face is access to products of prime importance to the family. They have solved this problem by devising survival strategies to support and maintain the quality of life of their families.

Access to credit

Access to credit in rural areas is very limited, since rural women rarely possess the fixed assets and resources that can be used as collateral.

Only 13 per cent of those receiving credit are women, equivalent to 4,957 borrowers at the national level. Credit for women is targeted at very specific programmes and women play no significant role in agricultural programmes.

For the most part, women have obtained loans from credit institutions outside the conventional sector. Generally speaking, the national financial sector does not grant credit to women and the percentage of women receiving credit from this source is very small.

With regard to credit in urban areas, the Banca Financiera supports women who are self-employed. In 1994, 56 per cent of the clients having access to credit were women. Nevertheless, a higher percentage of women receive credit from non-governmental organizations.

Right to own property

The Institute for Agrarian Reform (INRA) and the Nicaraguan Institute for Women (INIM) have been working since 1990 to promote women's right to own property.

An awareness campaign was undertaken among the beneficiaries as well as among INRA experts to give women first right of ownership of the lands which they were farming.

Land ownership solves the problem of women not having access to financial resources, and therefore the policy is vital in the context of the right of women to control their own productive resources.

VIII. Social rights

Right to health

Life expectancy for Nicaraguan women has increased from 59.8 to 66.2 years during the past decade. Cancer (of the cervix, the breast, etc.) is the most common cause of death among women, accounting for 58.9 per cent, followed by perinatal problems (haemorrhage, post-partum, toxemia of pregnancy, and other unspecified obstetrical problems), with 41.2 per cent and, in third place, accidents, with 22 per cent.

With regard to women's primary health care, 82.5 per cent of cases are treated on an outpatient basis, which is a result of a policy of comprehensive health care.

The right of all Nicaraguan citizens to equal health care is set out in article 59 of the Constitution. That right has been affected by the various economic measures undertaken, such as policies of structural adjustment and globalization.

The national health policy is the responsibility of the National Health System and provides for the consolidation of the Local Systems of Comprehensive Health Care (SILAIS), which operate across the country.

There is one specialized women's hospital, Casas Bases, with female staff offering disease-prevention and prenatal-monitoring services.

It is also important to point out the services being rendered by women's alternative health centres, found throughout the country, in the areas of women's sexual and reproductive health, as well as domestic violence as a public health problem.

These centres typically promote and nurture participatory doctor-patient communication and relationships based on solidarity, in keeping with their strategies and objectives.

Generally, workshops, seminars, discussion groups and educational sessions are organized for patients who seek health care in the centres.

Nevertheless, the health system still does not have a sound foundation for the development of policies to benefit women in the health sector.

The country has many women's centres and private clinics which offer alternative services in the areas of sexual, reproductive and maternal health, but these services are still inadequate, given the large number of women to be served.

Right to education

In this sector, the participation rate for women has been increasing, and progress, though slow, has been significant. Attendance has risen, with more than 50 per cent of women and girls having access to the four levels of education in the country. It is also important to note the change of attitude within Nicaraguan society, which now recognizes that, as women become more qualified, they are better able to play an integral role in the development of society via the labour market.

It is important to note that the proportion of women enrolled in university rose from 50 per cent of total enrolments in 1975 to more than 70 per cent currently, and the number of women enrolled in what were traditionally considered women's courses dropped while enrolment increased in such areas as law, medicine and engineering.

This shows that the universities' educational policies promote equal opportunity for men and women.

According to the latest survey carried out by the Nicaraguan Institute for Statistics and Censuses (INEC), illiteracy rates are higher among women, but, paradoxically, the dropout rate for females at the primary level is only 16.3 per cent as compared to 29.4 per cent overall.

The situation in the countryside can appear contradictory when analysed using urban models, without taking into account the specific problems of rural areas. Illiteracy in these areas has increased enormously, since secondary-level instruction is non-existent there.

In this section it is important to note the influence of women professionals and specialists working in various fields who, with their scientific background, have prioritized women's issues such as abuse, violence, the effect of adjustment policies, strategies adopted by women in response to the various development models, methods of training women, the evaluation of gender-based production projects, etc. This has all led to the publication of a great variety and number of documents on women's issues.

The university system took an important step by including gender in its curriculum, with a view to promoting awareness of women's issues among young students, both male and female, and to developing it as a topic for theses and essays.

It also bears mentioning that the UCA and UNAN universities[7] have organized postgraduate gender studies for men and women in order to raise levels of professionalism in gender-oriented careers. Women serving as researchers, university teachers, activists and upper management and professionals in governmental and non-governmental organizations have undertaken such studies. This step was the result of the work of a group of women teachers who were members of the UCA committee on gender.

[7] University of Central America (UCA) and National Autonomous University of Nicaragua (UNAN).

IX. The right to security of person

The recognition of domestic violence, specifically against women, as a violation of the right to life and the right to security of person has been a growing concern in Nicaragua in recent years.

This has led to a new openness in discussing and condemning domestic and sexual violence on the part of the Government, as shown by INIM in creating the Women's Centres, thereby endorsing the provisions of the Inter-American Convention on the Prevention, Punishment and Eradication of Violence against Women.

These centres have provided Nicaraguan women and children with a professional body which recognizes their rights and offers expertise in all cases of rape and physical abuse, as well as in other areas.

The centres typically provide support to women who register their complaints. This successful work is accompanied by awareness and prevention campaigns in the media so that society, and especially women and children, will know when they are victims of physical or sexual abuse.

The results to date have led the Government of Nicaragua, civil society, the judicial authority and external partners to support the extension of this project to other areas of the country, such as Estelí, Matagalpa, Masaya and Granada.

The project was undertaken with the mutual support and consent of various bodies coordinated by INIM, which realized that the problem was the responsibility not only of the Government but of society as a whole. Various government bodies, the judicial system, the police and the non-governmental centres offering alternative services have participated in this project.

X. The right of women to organize

The broad-based women's movement, made up of independent women's groups and women's sections of traditional groups such as political parties, guilds, unions and various other groups and associations, has been more aggressive on the political level in defending its practical and strategic gender-based needs.

Some examples in Nicaragua are the formation of women's centres, associations of professional women and associations of young women.

The national women's coalition was born of the movement of women who dedicate themselves to train other women through leadership workshops, identifying specific problems at the municipal level and strengthening the negotiating ability of all women having responsibilities at the local level.

The Commission for Young Women, which belongs to the Nicaraguan Youth Council, is made up of 51 organizations representing guilds, religious, political and cultural groups, etc., although there is almost no female representation on the Youth Council.

It is also significant that committees have been created by governmental and non-governmental institutions to deal specifically with women's issues, and especially those faced by adolescents and girls.

Women's events have been organized to evaluate and study the status of women in Nicaragua, and organizations of various kinds have been created to study women's issues in all sectors of society. Some examples are:

- Women's Forum;
- National Women's Coalition;
- Women's Anti-Violence Network;
- Network on Women and the Environment;
- Organizing Meeting for the Empowerment of Women in the New Millennium;
- Women's Network for Sustainable Development, etc.

Women have also established other organizing mechanisms to support national and international initiatives for the implementation of the agreements and conventions.

Both the Government and women's organizations have cooperated in making joint presentations to the World Summit for Social Development, Women's Voices on Population and Development and the World Conference on Women, held in Beijing.

A new group of men, made up of sociologists, doctors, psychiatrists and members of other major professions interested in strengthening the women's movement, has emerged. It is promoting discussion and study of important gender issues. The work of such groups empowers other men and makes them more aware of these issues. Some of the men are the spouses of women who have long been working as gender specialists.

XI. Women's right to create entities that benefit them

In the early 1990s, a new type of organization — the non-governmental organization — emerged in Nicaragua. Known as alternative centres, these organizations carry out actions to assist women in a number of areas, including training, the extension of revolving or unconventional credit, research, systematization of experiences and project support.

Non-governmental organizations, at both the international and local levels, have proved to be vital to the protection and promotion of human rights. The contributions they have made since their establishment go beyond the above-mentioned activities.

Among the most well known are the following:

- Puntos de Encuentro;
- CESADE;
- Mujer y Familia;
- AFALIT;
- PROFAMILIA;
- Mujer y Cambio;

- CIAM;
- CENZONTLE;
- CASAS DE LAS MUJERES;
- ACJ.

XII. Achievements that benefit Nicaraguan women[8]

- The establishment of the Nicaraguan Institute for Women (INIM) as a national mechanism specializing in the advancement of women, and of women's secretariats or sections in trade unions, guilds and political parties;
- The establishment of the Standing Commission on Women, Children, Youth and the Family of the National Assembly;
- The elaboration, by consensus between the Government and civil society, of a National Plan for Women, which will serve as a focal point for the branches of government in addressing the topics of education, labour and violence against women;
- The elaboration of a draft curriculum incorporating a gender perspective in teacher training in the national education system, such as in the process of analysing the design of sex-education manuals;
- The integration of the gender perspective into strategic planning in the National Development Plan, with emphasis on the Government's social agenda;
- With regard to legislation, major progress has been achieved in substantive law, namely, the formulation of laws to protect women, children and the family, although they have not been accompanied by changes in procedural law;
- The inculcation, albeit still in the early stages, of issues relating to women and gender in the academic community;
- The emergence and cohesion of the women's movement and, as a result, the creation of various types of alternative services for women at the national level; and
- The proportion, though still limited, of high-level posts which women have acquired in, inter alia, various branches of government, political parties, local governments, guilds and trade unions, which constitutes a huge stride for women.

XIII. Constraints to which Nicaraguan women are subject

- The fact that most laws do not take women's rights into account;
- Limited access to technical training and to formal and informal education;

[8] Nicaraguan Institute for Women (INIM), official report of the Government of Nicaragua to the Fourth World Conference on Women, 1995.

- Small percentage of women in managerial and decision-making posts;
- Low participation of gender-sensitive civil servants (male and female) in decision-making at all levels and sectors;
- Lack of protection and legal justice for most women;
- Access to only low-paying jobs;
- The fact that women account for the majority of the unemployed;
- The absence of a woman's perspective from most policies, plans, programmes and projects;
- The existence of inappropriate, anachronistic and discriminatory laws, giving rise to institutional injustice;
- Widespread belief that the socially accepted roles of women and men are normal;
- Insufficient public policies to guarantee women's participation in development on an equal footing;
- Lack or insufficiency of appropriate mechanisms for a consensual dialogue between the State and civil society;
- The fact that civil servants, both male and female, are virtually uninformed of and insensitive to the commitments undertaken by the Government of Nicaragua with regard to women;
- The processes of drafting and implementation of the law, which perpetuate discrimination against women;
- Ingrained attitudes which reproduce the socio-cultural model in the family, education and the media;
- The underdeveloped and unequal participation of civil society in public affairs and administration;
- The State's limited knowledge and its reluctance to involve civil society as a partner; and
- Little interest at the State level in the topic of women.

XIV. Conclusions

As can be seen from the information given above, Nicaragua is a country with an extremely young population; more than 80 per cent are under 40 years of age and women account for more than 50 per cent of the total.

The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women is the leading international instrument on women's rights in existence at this time; these rights are incorporated in the Nicaraguan Political Constitution for the benefit of women, which puts Nicaragua in a privileged position worldwide.

Nicaraguan legislation has favoured women by establishing governmental bodies and women's centres which provide services specifically for women. With the international community's recognition of women's rights as part of human

rights, Nicaragua has made a commitment to continue promoting progress towards achieving women's full legal equality.

The progress and achievements for women embodied in the Constitution can be attributed to participation by women experts in its reform with a view to helping Nicaraguan women.

The foregoing demonstrates that, although efforts have been made to achieve equity between men and women, the situation of women in Nicaragua is still characterized by levels of poverty and discrimination which violate their human rights and prevent them from becoming economic agents of national development.

Laws are merely an instrument to guarantee citizens' rights; in the case of women, they do not always guarantee that women will contribute to national development. A representative of the Secretary-General of the United Nations observed in a document that one of the greatest barriers to world development was the failure to involve women in the development process itself, adding that development would not be effective unless women were included in the process of planning programmes and projects for their own benefit.[9]

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[9] Forum/panel on public policies and gender, INAP, 996.